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SUBJECT: MUTHARIKA CALLS FOR RECONCILIATION AND REFORM AT INAUGURATION

REF: A. LILONGWE 445

[TB](#). LILONGWE 439

[TC](#). LILONGWE 438

[¶1. \(U\)](#) Summary: Bingu wa Mutharika was inaugurated as Malawi's third president on May 24 at a sparsely-attended ceremony in Blantyre. Calling for reconciliation, reform, and peace in his inaugural address, he outlined a program to move Malawi "from poverty to prosperity"; announced his intentions to institute broad reforms; and indicated his willingness to work with the opposition. His remarks were in stark contrast to those of outgoing president Bakili Muluzi who used the occasion to lambaste the opposition and the media, and to mischaracterize the assessment of the elections made by international observer groups. Heads of state from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Rwanda were present, along with delegations from several other countries. End summary.

A Political Rally in the Guise of an Inauguration

[¶2. \(U\)](#) Less than 24 hours after the announcement of results of May 20's presidential and parliamentary elections (reftel c), Bingu wa Mutharika was sworn in as Malawi's third president, and Cassim Chilumpha assumed the position of first vice-president. The ceremony at Blantyre's Chichiri Stadium was poorly attended, and spectators had to be bused in at the last moment to avoid the embarrassment of empty grandstands. There were no representatives from opposition parties present, nor were there more than a few individuals representing civil society. The audience was comprised of government officials, foreign dignitaries, the diplomatic corps, civil servants, and a large number of supporters of the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF).

[¶3. \(SBU\)](#) The presidents of South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Rwanda flew in for the day to attend the inauguration. Delegations representing Taiwan, Libya, Lesotho, Swaziland, Zambia, Tanzania, Namibia, Kenya, SADC, and COMESA also attended. The crowd roundly applauded President Mugabe on his arrival, but saved its loudest cheers for South African President Mbeki. (Note: Mbeki was clearly the prize most coveted by the GOM to give legitimacy to the elections. His participation was in question as late as the afternoon of May 23 when election results were finally announced amid protests by opposition parties.)

[¶4. \(U\)](#) Attendance at the ceremony was affected by the bitterness of opposition supporters at the conduct of the elections, and by their disappointment with the results. When opposition candidate Gwanda Chakuamba preemptorily announced his "victory" on May 22, most of his supporters believed he had indeed won. When it transpired that Muluzi's hand-picked successor had won the election with only 36% of the votes (with the remaining 64% split among four opposition candidates), protests became violent in the streets of Blantyre (reftel b) which also was a factor in the low turn-out at the inauguration.

[¶5. \(U\)](#) Though Mutharika concluded with a gracious acceptance speech outlining an ambitious reform program, the bulk of the ceremony had the feel of a political rally. Master of Ceremonies (and Muluzi's Minister of State for Presidential Affairs) Ken Lipenga politicized the invocation prayers. To the roars of the partisan crowd, he took thinly-veiled pot-shots at religious groups (primarily the Catholics, Presbyterians, and Anglicans) who had opposed the UDF. Dripping sarcasm, Lipenga thanked clergy for their prayers for a new president and for fair elections, saying that "the Almighty has answered that prayer." Hand-picked pro-UDF clergy members then gave invocations.

[¶6. \(SBU\)](#) Outgoing president Bakili Muluzi got the crowd to its feet in his trademark political rally style. He thanked the people of Malawi for their support over the last ten years, and then lashed out at the opposition. Muluzi noted that international observers from various organizations had come to Malawi, and that all had declared the elections free and fair. (Note: In fact, not one group has done so, per reftel a, and the EU issued a press release within hours disputing Muluzi's statement.) Muluzi also poured scorn on

opposition candidates protesting the results and the administration of the elections, on international media (and specifically the BBC) for "breeding unnecessary confusion," and emphasized repeatedly that Malawi was "a sovereign state" and will not take orders from anyone.

Mutharika: "From Poverty to Prosperity"

17. (U) Mutharika completely changed the tone in his thoughtful and muted address. He called for reconciliation, peace, and deep reforms, pledging to move Malawi from poverty to prosperity. He outlined a four-pronged reform package in the public, private, agricultural, and civil service sectors.

He also acknowledged the need for the GOM to build and strengthen relations with the donor community -- a clear reference to problems Malawi recently faced with the IMF after GOM failure to keep its pledges led to the suspension of funding.

18. (U) The new president also called for a reduction in the size of Malawi's 46-member cabinet, better controls on parastatals, strict adherence to a national budget, and the move of the presidency and other executive branch offices from Blantyre to the capital city of Lilongwe. Notably, he pledged to stamp out corruption with a "zero tolerance" policy. He promised independent audits of government spending, the strengthening of anti-corruption institutions, and the swift prosecution of offenders "at all levels." To a surprising round of applause (considering the audience), he added: "And let me repeat -- at ALL levels!"

Comment

19. (SBU) Mutharika said all the right things and impressed many observers by deviating from the script adhered to by the rest of the UDF at the ceremony. The fact that his comments were in such sharp contrast to those of Muluzi and other UDF heavyweights is a clear indication of the challenge ahead of him in the coming months. As chairman of the UDF, Muluzi has made it known he has no intention of fading into the background. In fact, he plans to continue taking the lead on "political" matters while Mutharika busies himself cleaning up the economic mess he inherited. If Mutharika is able to assert independence from Muluzi, he may be able to follow through on some of his pledges to put Malawi's house in order. With no power base of his own and without a working majority in parliament, however, Mutharika has his work cut out for him. End Comment.

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